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Basking in a Blue Glow?
Technology and the Humanities Classroom

by Susan Swartzlander

Susan Swartzlander, an Associate Professor of English, designed and taught GVSU's first online course, British Writers II. She edited a collection of essays on May Sarton (That Great Sanity, University of Michigan Press).

At a workstation in a campus living center sits an 18-year-old whose face appears to emit a blue tinge from the many hours he has spent basking in a computer screen's glow. He cannot imagine trekking across the ravine to the library with so much intriguing information immediately available at the click of a button. A world away, an adventurous 78-year-old learns to use the computer her children gave her, so she can communicate more easily with family living in cities as distant as Houston, Chicago, and Hong Kong. She has mastered email but is afraid to venture onto the Internet, explaining that the Internet "ruins peoples’ lives." An unnamed "they" will "steal your money, show you pornography, and lure you into lurid chat rooms."

While our MTV generation students by and large embrace new technology (lines are longer at the campus email terminals than they are at the Commons' Taco Bell), most humanities faculty approach technology and teaching as warily as my 78-year-old friend eyes the Internet, and for good reason. We are, after all, not purveyors of fast food. In many ways we see society's obsession with speed, ease, and convenience as contrary to what we value. What could be any less speedy, easy, or convenient than reading a challenging novel and struggling to understand how the writer crafts her work, what the author says about her world, about humanity, and what meaning these words have for us as individuals and as a society? Joking that part of my job is helping to make the world safe for students' intellectual veld and vast, intriguing worlds theirs to explore. In the thrill of discovery, there is the world, and in the process students in liberal arts courses learn about a world of ideas, writers and more articulate, well.

Images in a world of words
Along with many others comfortable in a world of printed page is concerned look of fresh print on our eyes. Our students share our love of the presentation of the image. Most of us having logged the subject such shows as MTV videos, characterized by movement, and quick cuts of black-and-white world, were painstakingly. I began presentations in the students better understand not only very much a part of

To teach Pope's poem, for example, I use content images in a computer to illustrate the eighteen lampoons. Many from Internet sites; others Students laugh at the rigged frigate or the
the world safe for literature, I try to spark my students’ intellectual curiosity, to show them that vast, intriguing world (past and present) which is theirs to explore. I want them to experience the thrill of discovery when they learn about the world, and in the process, themselves. As students in liberal arts classes think, write, and speak about a world of ideas, they become clearer thinkers and more articulate speakers and writers, as well.

So what does this life of the mind have to do with a life online? Technology has added a new, richer dimension to my classroom, helping me to achieve these goals. Computer-generated slide shows, the Internet, class bulletin boards and chat rooms have all transformed my courses, providing new possibilities for reaching an increasingly challenging audience.

Images in a world of words
Along with many of my colleagues, I am most comfortable in a world of words. The feel of the printed page is concrete, tangible, reassuring. The look of fresh print on a stark white page pleases our eyes. Our students, though, do not always share our love of the word. Theirs is the generation of the image. Many of our students come to us having logged thousands of hours watching such shows as MTV’s “Real World” and music videos, characterized by vivid color, fast movement, and quick cuts. We greet them with a black-and-white world, which moves rather slowly and painstakingly. I began using computer-generated presentations in the classroom as a way to help students better understand a world very different from their own, by adopting a strategy that is very much a part of their lives.

To teach Pope’s poem The Rape of the Lock, for example, I use contemporary words, music, and images in a computer-generated slide show to illustrate the eighteenth century aristocracy Pope lampoons. Many of the images come from Internet sites; others I scanned from print sources. Students laugh at the hairdo complete with a fully rigged frigate or the hairstyles that incorporate waterfalls and gardens, coiffures so elaborate hairdressers had to stand on scaffolding to finish their work. Students grin at the corsets and paniers, enjoying contemporary accounts from newspapers that charge these inventions were employed to keep “saucy men” at a distance. Caricatures of the elaborate ritual “the toilette” help the class see that Pope, too, satirizes the shallowness of an aristocracy known for ostentatiousness. The students bring to the literary text a deeper understanding of the context from which the poem emerged because they have seen with their own eyes images of that world. My goals have not changed: I am still asking students to read carefully, to think through difficult material, and to understand the significance of what Pope does, but I am better preparing my students to undertake these tasks.

In some cases, the supplementary images were originally an integral part of the literary experience. For example, etchings from a William Blake archive on the Web let students read Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience with the illustrations Blake originally created to complement his own poetry. In other cases, I use the computer shows to more easily explain complex issues. With modernist literature, for example, students typically have a tough time “getting the point,” as they say. When I began teaching, I would explain that, spurred by develop-
opments in everything from psychology to physics to photography, modernist writers realized there is more to reality than meets the eye. The tidy little story with a neat ending no longer accomplished the writer's goals. Rejecting what Hemingway called "straight go ahead plot," these writers rendered the complexities of "reality" by experimenting with language and narrative techniques, presenting multiple perspectives, and blurring the distinctions between subjective and objective reality.

In class, I would point out countless examples in the literary texts. Students would dutifully memorize my list of the characteristics of modernism and repeat it at exam time, somehow still not quite comprehending what a major shift in thinking modernism represented. Students now better understand the narrative experiments undertaken by modernist writers when I show them the same techniques employed by Impressionist, Symbolist, and Cubist painters, as well as by composers like Stravinsky. Students see in the onscreen canvases the same techniques and preoccupations they can now see more clearly in the works we read. In addition, most students are intrigued by the interconnectedness of all these different facets of history, science, psychology, art, and music. They no longer experience the modern aesthetic as a quirky peculiarity of literary history but as a worldview pervading all dimensions of the early twentieth century. Students still dutifully memorize my list of modernist characteristics, but now the list means something more tangible to them!

Moving Megabytes—Information at your Fingertips

Although the Internet can never replace the library, I continue to marvel at what is available so easily online. Recently, for a chapter I am writing on *Finnegans Wake*, I needed to consult an esoteric, 50-pound, multi-volume compilation of Irish manuscripts, *The Annals of the Four Masters*. Not only was the complete work online, I could also search it electronically for the specific theme that interested me. Previously an interlibrary loan request could take several weeks and some dollars to fulfill. Gleaning relevant passages would require several more weeks of skimming the printed text.

Practically every text in the public domain appears as an electronic text on the Internet. This semester, for instance, my Honors Eurociv students can find every text required for the course online. Just a click on the etext button from the syllabus homepage and voila, instant text! In my experience, the texts have been at least as accurate as published versions. Students often still choose to purchase longer works (I would too and advise them to do so), but the money saving option is there.

In addition to the electronic text links, I have created a "tools page" for students. This list connects students to reference works available online: *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, Roget's Thesaurus, Webster's Dictionary, Strunk and White's Elements of Style, and the Modern Language Association's Guide to Citing Sources*. The reference page also offers resources including discipline-specific databases that provide links to my students, including thesis statements, desired coherence, sentence construction, and students are particularly encouraged to send questions about the writing center, which will respond within 24 hours. Just as the easy access to material online, student participation has grown. With these resources, students consult them with less time in the mad rush to fulfill the deadline. Students now use the writing aids sooner in the composition process this semester. The students are able to quickly find the right material to support their initial ideas. As a result, the students will be more ready to discuss what went wrong as well as what worked for in drafts of future papers.

Electronic texts of course materials for a course as long as you may ask, how does one actually have online texts. Electronic texts still are bookstores, libraries, and publishing companies, but with each semester, I use a larger number of online texts similar to my use of images, the texts help bring the text close to life the voices of the original text; found materials on the Internet that otherwise know exist.

When I teach *Sister Wendy's Guide to Seeing Art: Victorian Urban Life*, I include excerpts from *Sadler Commission Report*, *Conditions of Child Labor*, *Children's Health in America*, *Mississippi...* excerpts from *Queen Victoria's Paean to the Poor*.
The onscreen canvases of primary readings that we consult are filled with the occupations they can hardly imagine from the works we read. In my own courses, I am intrigued by the different facets of technology, art, and music. The modern aesthetic of library history but as a tangible version of the early digital systems by now dutifully memo-

ration at your

Electronic texts online provide primary readings for a course as well as reference tools. But, you may ask, how much of an impact do etexts actually have on the classroom? After all, there are bookstores, libraries, and photocopies. With each semester, I find myself using more and more illustrative texts from online in a way that is similar to my use of the images. Just as with the images, the texts help me to recreate a world rather distant from our own and recreate it by bringing to life the voices of the past. In many cases, I have found materials on the Internet that I would not otherwise know existed.

When I teach Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, a Victorian novel about industrialization and urban life, I include supplementary texts from the Sadler Commission testimony about factory conditions, child labor, and sanitation, as well as excerpts from Queen Victoria’s diary gushing about that paean to industry, the Great Exhibition of 1851. This version of “in their own words” brings a chorus of voices from the past into the classroom, leading students to a more sophisticated understanding of Gaskell and her world. When I teach Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, I bring to class a series of letters describing his lecture circuit across the U.S., including one in which he details his reception onstage in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Students are startled to think of Twain addressing their ancestors right here, as startled as they are to imagine a world in which the writers of the day are the leading intellectuals and celebrities who can make a difference in society.
Conjuring Conversation—
Interactive Software

It is ironic that a medium which
many fear will isolate individu­
als can actually help us to com­
municate more effectively and in
more meaningful ways. Proba­
bly among our most difficult
challenges as teachers is to entice,
provoke, and cajole our students
into expressing themselves. In­
tellectual exchange is at the heart
of what we do, yet classroom dis­
cussion rarely comes easily. Ev­
erything, from midwestern cul­
ture to student culture, works
against us. Our students are
pleasant, polite, and passive.
Even when they hold strong
opinions on a topic that matters
to them, many students are re­
luctant to assert themselves.
Some fear others will think they
are too outspoken or too smart.
Some, young women in particu­
lar but not exclusively, feel they
have nothing important enough
to say. Others fear they will say
the wrong thing and risk mark­
ing themselves as someone who
doesn’t belong (a particular con­
cern of students from working
class or minority backgrounds).
Others are just introspective
types who come to their own
ideas through a longer process
of reflection. A day or two af­
fter the discussion, these students
know what they think and would be ready to
reveal it, if only the class weren’t now onto a
completely different topic.

Email discussion groups and software such as
WebCt with its mail, bulletin board, and chat
rooms hold out real promise for promoting class
discussion, perhaps, in fact, more promise than a
professor’s encouragement or designating a sub­
stantial percentage of the grade for “preparation and
participation.” When I began to use email
discussion groups, I realized that students who
initially never said a peep in class could roar like
lions online. A certain amount of anonymity, or
distance, it turned out, could be a very good
thing. In fact, those who were initially silent in
class gained enough confidence through elec­
tronic postings that they were able to speak in
class by the end of the semester. The magic,
though, does not happen on its own. The same
principles that guide us in the classroom apply to
the electronic classroom. Teachers need to read
the postings and respond to them with encour­
aging words as well as constructive questions that
will push students to think analytically, to de­
velop intellectually, and to make connections
between their own world and what they read in
ours.

Two years ago, Fran Kelleheer, a history profes­
sor, and I developed a semester-long writing as­
ignment for our Honors Eurociv class; we dubbed it
the Voyager Project. Forced to flee plague-rid­
den London in the 1660’s, students took on his­
torical personas, writing letters home after their
voyages across the globe. The class combined his­
torical research with creative writing to detail
what the world was like in their assigned locales
(Africa, India, the Caribbean, Russia, for example).
An initial letter detailed the voyage, and subse­quent letters explained changes over the centu­
ries as subsequent generations succeeded the pio­
near voyagers. The letters were posted on the
Internet, and students responded to each other’s
work through email, noting parallels with their
own assigned regions as well as making connec­
tions to the work we were doing in class. This
assignment helped us to put historical and liter­
ary developments in text that otherwise would
have been dry. We effectively extended the
classroom and expanded the class without adding hours
to the full slate. The students en­
joyed creating their letters. They also took pride
in their work. When we were on the Web for the
giving holiday, a number of stu­
dents members to the class were

Interactive software offers opportunities for learing
that would not otherwise be possible. Two years ago, fellow English
colleague and I conceived of a series of "Chat Talk," a terrific sup­plemen­
tary to the Voyager Project. Students who were new to their
host cities created a great deal of interest and re­
ported difficulties. Using an online forum for the bulletin
board, email, chat rooms, and discussion groups, teachers can arrange for regular colleagues in the class to engage in a conversation or post to their online discussion boards.

If Carol, or any of our faculty, wants to hear from all of our students on a topic such as the MEDC or the upcoming event, she just has to log on to the chat room or all of the sessions, which can be missed the event.

Online with the Students

So far I have focused on creating an
environment in which student
activity is occurring in a traditional classroom.
Particularly in the humanities, the
threat of the Internet has
threaten academe as much as
discussion groups for
nightmares, envisioning
accounting books
and low overhead ex­
would be ready to...erent now onto a
and software such as
board, and chat
promoting class
more promise than a
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others' parallels with their
as making con-
ing in class. This
ary developments in Europe into a global con-
text that otherwise would not have been possible.
We effectively extended the reach of our class-
room and expanded our syllabus substantially
without adding hours and credits to an already
full slate. The students learned a great deal, en-
joying creating their letters and reading others'.
They also took pride in the fact that their letters
were on the Web for all to see. Over the Thanks-
giving holiday, a number of the students led fam-
ily members to the computer at home to view
their work.

Interactive software has the potential to create
opportunities for learning and communication
that would not otherwise exist. A couple of years
ago, fellow English colleague Carol Winters con-
ceived of a series of discussions called “Teacher
Talk,” a terrific support group for our graduates
who were new teachers. These events gener-
ated a great deal of interest, but scheduling pre-
sented difficulties. Using WebCt, I put together
an online forum for our alumni with a bulletin
board, email, chatroom and links for educators.
Teachers can arrange in advance to meet particu-
lar colleagues in the chatroom for “real
time” conversation or post queries to the bulletin board
seeking feedback from anyone who later logs on.
If Carol, or any of our English education fac-
ty, wants to hear feedback about some aspect
of our curriculum or facilitate a discussion on a
topic such as the MEAP, she can post a notice of
the upcoming event. Anyone interested can log
on to the chat room and participate in any part
or all of the session. Later, a transcript of the
discussion could be posted for anyone who
missed the event.

Online with the Show
So far I have focused on technology as it enhances
a traditional classroom. Many faculty, particular-
ly in the humanities, worry that online courses
threaten academe as we know it. In electronic
discussion groups faculty describe their worst
nightmares, envisioning administrators toting up
in accounting books the tuition dollars received
and low overhead expended with online courses
enrolling thousands. The mad
rush of some proprietary
schools to create online degree-
granting empires reasonably fu-
els such concerns. Businesses,
such as “Real Education,” (great
name! What, then, are we?)
shoehorn faculty course material
into their own course templates
(and, rumor has it, claim copy-
right in order to resell that ma-
terial to other schools as origi-

The University of Phoenix
advertisen an MBA, as well as
several other master’s programs
and will begin an online Doctor
of Management program start-
ing in early 1999. The Califor-
nia system offers a full comple-
ment of online courses from its
regional campuses, and the
Western Governors University
(WGU), a consortium of west-
nern states conceived several
years ago by their governors,
recently opened its virtual
doors, acting as a broker to bring
together course providers (uni-
versities or businesses willing to
pay a $10,000 fee) and students.
A Chronicle of Higher Education
article recently pegged that
opening as more ballyhoo than
boom since only 75 students na-
ationwide enrolled. WGU
claimed this as a good sign, be-
lieve it or not—students are “se-
rious” about the school, they
say, waiting to find out more
about WGU before enrolling.

I have serious doubts about
how high quality a totally online
degree can be, or how commit-
ted to “real education” a strictly
moneymaking venture might be.
Any quality class requires a structure and content shaped by a knowledgeable faculty member, as well as significant opportunities for class interaction and feedback. If a course is nothing more than lecture notes dumped online and assessment by computer-scored quizzes, students are getting little for their tuition dollars. What would distinguish such an endeavor from a diploma mill? A course that is more than a heap of notes and multiple choice exams requires a significant expenditure of a faculty member's time for development and instruction, making it no longer an entrepreneur's cash cow.

An online course can serve useful functions. I am currently teaching GVSU's first completely online course, British Writers II (a survey of writers from the 18th century through the 20th), with 21 language arts students in Traverse City. I designed the materials for the course myself, aiming to replicate as closely as possible the best qualities of the traditional humanities classroom. Students have an online "syllabus" page, which outlines the reading for each week. By pressing on the etext button, students can get the week's reading online. The "Go to Class" button takes students to a "Welcome to Class" page which provides background materials for that week's work. Buttons on this page include a "To Do" checklist, as well as information about what the critics say, key or unusual quotations, discussion questions, literary terms, historical context, biographical information, internet links, and literary gossip. In addition, I use software called RealPresenter to convert my PowerPoint lectures with narration into self-running "movies" on the Internet.

Students respond to discussion questions or tackle assigned projects individually and within designated study circles. Class members post their work on the course bulletin board; other students and I respond to the postings. So far, postings have generally been quite sophisticated and thoughtful. Sometimes students meet each other or me in the class chat room. Here the talk often digresses from the course work to anything else, just as in real conversation. However, this digression is good too, adding an important human element to the work. I try to create an enthusiasm in the class by interjecting my own sense of humor in my postings, as well as in course materials like the "literary gossip" feature. I also create animations as "prizes" for work well done. The first student to post a bulletin board response to the reading found the next time she logged on an animated card that read, "Bravo, Brave Brenda"; one flower grew to a screen size bouquet. Students' postings on the course bulletin board responses. Students nominated annotations they found most helpful, and the "winners" logged on the next day to see their prize, a 19th century watercolor illustration of the poem that I had altered to create an animation of the Baron snipping Belinda's lock of hair, precipitating an attack by a legion of sylphs.

All of this, however, takes a tremendous amount of time. It is now the final week, and I have sent to these students 946 emails and posted nearly 600 bulletin board responses. Students are getting individualized instruction that takes me about an hour per week per student. The students are also spending more time on the course than they would in a regular class: their average is now the final week, and I have sent to these students 946 emails and posted nearly 600 bulletin board responses. Students are getting individualized instruction that takes me about an hour per week per student. The students are also spending more time on the course than they would in a regular class: their

class discussion appears in the bulletin board postings. All of this cannot be done so easily, as in real conversation.

In return for their efforts, students are getting a course that is much more expressive than they would in a regular class: their course might provide.

It is easy to see, therefore, that classes to be rather paid. The larger the enrollment, the involved of a faculty member. The content or interacting with the course is to accommodate. There are also some students who come from backgrounds.

Overall, the online course is a viable method to study the written word. It meets the needs of students who come from backgrounds and venture capitalists.
Historical context, bibliographic database links, and literature software called "movies" on the bulletin board; other postings. So far, there are quite sophisticated class members posting. All of their work and communication has to be done in writing. There is no such thing as a simple question that can be answered in a few seconds at the beginning or end of class.

In return for their effort and mine, the class is getting a course pretty similar in quality to one I offer on campus, one affording even more individualized attention. Initially I assumed that I could not know this distant class as well as students I meet every week. Quite the opposite has been true: the medium encourages people to be much more expressive. As my Traverse City class responded to the literature we read, they revealed a great deal about their fears, hopes, and dreams. Shaw's play *Major Barbara* provoked a discussion thread about class and oppression, highlighted by the students' own experiences working to put themselves through school. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* precipitated a discussion about human nature and the existence of evil in the world. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* had these students pouring their hearts out on the question of whether teachers can make a difference for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is easy to see, though, a potential for online classes to be rather pale imitations of the real thing. The larger the enrollment, or the more limited the involvement of a faculty member in shaping the content or interacting with students, the less likely the course is to accomplish those goals we think are essentials for the humanities classroom. There are also some students for whom this kind of course might provide a recipe for disaster. If a student is not very mature or well motivated or cannot follow directions well, the student will struggle with the format, although one could argue that those characteristics do not bode well for success in a traditional classroom either.

Overall, the online course has a role to play in higher education, but faculty, not entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, need to determine what appropriate role is. We must insist that online courses offer meet a standard equivalent to our on-campus courses.

It is crucial that we explore the world of technology just as we expect others to explore our world of ideas. Technology offers exciting possibilities to help us teach our students in a way that sparks their intellectual curiosity and accomplishes our goals for liberal arts education. Technology can enhance our traditional classrooms and let us take those classrooms on the road. In my seventeen years of teaching, I have not encountered anything that has so much potential to transform our disciplines, our students, and us. These technological innovations are not passing fancies. We cannot afford to dismiss technology as irrelevant to our disciplines or to our classrooms. We must bask a bit more in the blue glow, grab hold of those pulsing pixels and shape the future of the humanities classroom in a way that maintains our most cherished traditions and values.